

House Republican Press Release

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School Nutrition Mandate: Erodes School Boards' Authority; Disrupts Education Process



Childhood obesity is a serious health issue that needs to be addressed.

Unfortunately, a measure that recently received final legislative approval does not achieve that goal. What it does do is erode the authority of local boards of education, disrupt the academic process and complicate planning and budgeting by school food service providers.

For all of those reasons, we did not support the legislation (Senate Bill 1309) when it came to the House of Representatives on May 18th.

Before we voted, we sought the advice of Superintendent of Schools Dr. Larry Leverett and the Wellness Committee of the Greenwich PTA Council. We listened to their concerns about this bill, which is awaiting final action by Governor M. Jodi Rell.

While all of us believe the stated goal of reducing childhood obesity is a worthy one, the direction this measure takes to achieve it is what makes the bill both unacceptable and unworkable.

News media accounts correctly stated the legislation would prohibit the sale of sugary soft drinks, candy and junk food in school vending machines (which we support, but believe is a decision that should be made and implemented by local boards of education) but overlooked two issues of great concern to school districts throughout Connecticut and which generated lengthy debate in the General Assembly.

One of them would require schools to provide 20 minutes of daily exercise – above and beyond any regularly scheduled physical education requirements. On the surface, it appears innocuous – but in practice it would hamstring academic scheduling.

Currently, a student has 20 minutes for recess, 20 minutes for a physical education class (on days it is scheduled) and now another 20 minutes for exercise. This takes one full hour out of the day and for the younger children, it is far more than an hour as it typically takes them longer to transition from one activity to another.

We constantly ask our teachers to teach our children to read better, write better and count better. Now we would take away academic time and ask them to do push ups.

Another objectionable feature of the bill is a section that would require the state Board of Education to stipulate on an annual basis which foods could be served in Connecticut schools.

The mandate would not only limit the menu choices school cafeterias could offer, it also would mean food items that were acceptable one year might be disallowed in the following one - which would disrupt their food service departments' planning and budgeting efforts.

In addition, the legislation would require each school district to create a food nutrition council to investigate Connecticut grown products and recommend which ones should be added to our school menus. The Greenwich school district has already done this without a Hartford mandate.

While the provision might offer limited benefits to Connecticut farmers and food suppliers, it would do little or nothing to reduce the incidence of childhood obesity.

The bill also would allow the sale of diet soft drinks, which is inconsistent with the stated goal of promoting the consumption of healthy snacks and beverages.

Eliminating sugary soft drinks, candy and junk food from school vending machines and cafeterias is clearly a desirable goal and one we all want to attain.

Adding more mandates to our overburdened school districts is not the solution.